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Sawyer - The slave trade in the District  
of Columbia - 1849

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FROM

*Hon. J. G. Palfrey*

**SPEECH**

**OF**

**HON. WILLIAM SAWYER, OF OHIO,**

**ON THE**

**SLAVE TRADE IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA:**

**DELIVERED**

**IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, JANUARY 10, 1849.**

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## SLAVE TRADE IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

On a motion to reconsider the vote by which the House had adopted the resolution instructing the Committee on the District of Columbia to report a bill to abolish the slave trade in the District of Columbia—

Mr. SAWYER said:

Mr. SPEAKER: I have heard this question discussed from time to time, and by one gentleman after another, until it would really seem there is no other subject claiming the deliberations of this House but negro slavery. It takes precedence of all other questions—nay, it elbows all other business out of this House. Come up what may, in steps abolitionism, pushes it aside, and appropriates to its own use the time which properly belongs to the people—the white people—the people who constitute this great nation. Nearly half the session has already passed. There are now on the calendar some seven hundred private bills yet to be acted upon, and nearly two hundred of a general and important nature, in which every citizen of this Republic is interested; besides, petitions are coming in daily praying Congress to legislate upon many subjects which the petitioners deem worthy of the consideration of their representatives here; and yet, from morning to night, day after day, and week after week, nothing is talked of here, nothing can get a hearing that will not afford an opportunity to lug in something about negro slavery. It is negro in the morning—the poor negro at noon—and at night again this same negro is thrust in upon us. Sir, I am heartily tired of this nigger business. I want a change. I beg gentlemen to remember there are some white people in this country, and that these white people are entitled to some consideration—rather more I think than the blacks; at least, my sympathies and affections lead me to this opinion. Yet, a stranger, unacquainted with the real condition of things here, on listening to the debates on this floor, would come to a different conclusion—would very naturally suppose that Congress was instituted mainly for the benefit of negroes. And I begin to fear that the hundreds of American citizens who have presented claims for the consideration and action of Congress may come to the same inference.

There are, too, large numbers of petitions before us praying Congress to adopt various measures, some intended to have a local and some a general bearing. Are these petitioners not to be heard? Are they to be crowded out of Congress by niggers? Are they to be told that the negro, whom they only know as inferiors, wield a superior influence in this

House? Sir, no gentleman here will speak out and say "yes!" But it is an old saying, and time has approved it true, that "actions speak louder than words." And the actions of gentlemen here answer these questions in a very different language from that their lips would give. Their constituents may be satisfied with this difference between words and actions; they may open their ears to the one, and close their eyes to the other. But, sir, the constituency I have the honor to represent are not of this stamp; they are an intelligent and independent people, far above the craven's favorite game of hide-and-go-seek; they like plain dealing; they like to see a man's words and actions correspond; they do not recognize the nigger as an equal, far less a superior; they expect their Representative to look to their interests, and not to waste his time in mischievous endeavors to hoist the nigger into the social scale with them. They prefer to see such measures as are calculated to promote their own happiness and prosperity pushed along.

It is now two years since I had the honor to introduce into this House a bill for the graduation and reduction of the price of the public lands, and to give to every poor man and to every poor woman who is the head of a family one hundred and sixty acres for a home, free of cost. This bill has never been acted upon, notwithstanding my repeated exertions in its favor. The benefits that would arise from the operations of such a law to that portion of the State which I have the honor to represent, are incalculable. There are large tracts of Government lands there which, at the present price, will not sell in many years. This is a very serious obstacle in the way of the improvement of that portion of the State. Many parts are as yet but sparsely settled, and neighbors find themselves separated by broad tracts of public land, the price of which is too high to induce persons to buy and settle. Families are thus placed too far apart to unite in establishing schools, and to enjoy that frequent interchange of society and good offices which settlers in new countries have so much need of. Where settlements are retarded by large bodies of public lands, roads cannot be worked to any advantage. Every man has enough to do on his own land without making roads through the public domain. The Government, too, is the loser by this miserly system.

The wealth and strength of a nation consist in the numbers and prosperity of its people. The public lands are not national wealth until they are

settled, improved, and made productive. Then, indeed, the Government derives benefits from them, and not till then. By the cultivation of these lands the exports of the country are greatly increased, and in proportion to this increase will be the demand for those articles on which the Government receives a tax, and of this tax her revenues are made up. It is therefore the duty and interest of the Government to offer every facility for the settlement and improvement of these lands. And I believe it could adopt no plan better calculated to further this great object, than to give to every head of a family, man or woman, a quarter section, upon the express condition that they live upon and improve it. Thus would be placed in the hands of poor and industrious persons the means of obtaining those articles on which the revenues of the Government are raised; and the settler would thereby render an ample equivalent for the home he would receive.

But there is another reason why lands should be given to such persons as are not able to buy. It is the duty of the Government to aid, protect, and encourage industry; and there is no better way to do these than to place before the laborer proper inducements to exertion. Give him a little tract of land where he can make a home, and feel certain that every stroke of labor he makes is for his own and his family's benefit, and not to be divided with others. He can sit down under his own "vine and fig-tree," with his wife and his little ones around him, without fear of being driven away at the will of a capricious landlord. Thus will industry receive its proper reward, and the certainty of this reward will act as a stimulus to exertion. This is the way to make a wealthy country, and an industrious, virtuous, and prosperous population.

There is much land in the northwestern part of Ohio as rich as any in the world, but covered with such heavy forests that few men can afford to pay the present Government price for it, and then clear up their farms. They can put their money to more profitable uses. And for these reasons, this fertile region in many parts is but sparsely inhabited. But give these lands to the hardy but poor pioneer, and this wilderness will soon bloom as the rose; the sound of the axe will be heard in every direction, and the crash of falling trees will attest the energy with which it is wielded; and the crackling flame and curling smoke make Indian summer for the sturdy laborer within his clearing. There will be "rollings" every Thursday, and "raisings" every Saturday. The dinner horn will be heard across broad fields, and will be answered by the keen appetites attendant upon honest labor. The music of the spinning-wheel will echo back the gayety of the happy-hearted lass. Little boys and girls, ruddy with health and made cheerful by plenty, will crowd the forest paths to schools. Good roads will thread the wilderness, and upon them will be seen hundreds of hardy farmers wending their way to markets with the products of their own labor, and returning with presents for their little children, and comforts and conveniences for their families. And in this demand for foreign productions in exchange for our own, the Government will very soon receive four times the value of the lands it gives to produce this glorious result. And here, too, in times of war, the Government will find soldiers; and in times of

peace a happy and prosperous people. And what more can it reasonably desire? Upon every consideration of humanity, of justice, and of sound policy, this plan of disposing of the public lands ought to be adopted.

All agree that air and water belong to the human race in common, and laws are enacted to protect all alike in their enjoyment of them, because man cannot exist without them; and yet land is just as necessary to his existence as either of these elements, and yet its use is circumscribed, confined to those who have money to buy. This should not be so. The great secret of American prosperity is in our liberal land system—liberal compared with that of other governments, yet capable of great improvement; and the faster that improvement is made the more rapid will be our progress to that glorious destiny before us. This, sir, is something in which my constituents feel an interest far deeper than in any nigger question you can raise here. They want to see the wild lands around them in the hands of industrious, useful settlers, and it is in the power of Congress to grant this reasonable wish.

Now, I appeal to the good sense of this House; I appeal to the patriotism of gentlemen here; to their sense of obligation to their constituents and to the country; to their respect for the dignity and credit of this body, to abandon this infamous waste of time—for such I must call it. I desire to cast no censure upon this House, but I must say a question has been agitated here for some time which should long ago have been disposed of, or kept out until the great interests of the nation could have received the necessary action: it is a subject of minor, or rather of no importance to my constituents; there are other subjects before this House of far greater interest to them. The House is spending its time day after day without any beneficial result, in the discussion of abstract questions; and certain gentlemen seem to aspire to nothing higher than raising questions the effect of which is only to embarrass others in the votes they are to give, without aiming at any practical good. For my own part, I shall feel no embarrassment from this source. My way is clear. My constituents will not require me to give my vote, unless upon tangible and practical propositions. They care nothing about the ingenious devices gentlemen may choose to invent for their own amusement, or to entrap and puzzle other gentlemen. They look to Congress for proceedings of a higher character, for legislation of a graver nature. They expect solid benefits from the meetings of Congress, and not flimsy declamations upon as flimsy subjects.

I ask gentlemen to look seriously into this matter; to withdraw their eyes for a few moments from the beautiful niggers, if they can—if their sympathies and affections are not too deeply involved in the fortunes of Sambo and Dinah—if they can for a little while recollect that there are a few white people too who would like to receive some attention,—and to proceed to the despatch of the public business, and to let negroes and negro slavery rest a little. They will be all the better for it; and better still would it be for them if this obtrusive sympathy had never been excited. There was a time when this question was unknown in the halls of Congress. Gentlemen assembled here then to attend to the public interests, and quietly

permitted the respective States to regulate their own internal affairs in their own way. In those days, the work of emancipation went on without noise, but with a steady progress. During this period, several of the States in which slavery was legalized adopted systems of gradual emancipation; and under the slow, but sure and safe, operations of this system, slavery disappeared from within their limits. Other States, in which the institution still exists, were about to follow this enlightened and politic example. But a few individuals in free States, incapable of bringing themselves into notice by honorable means, determined to do so by expedients of a different character. Their malicious spirits could not contemplate the steady and smooth progress of a good work without envy; and their first movement was to check it, by pretending to hasten it along—thus adding hypocrisy to malignity. They therefore interfered with the good work which the citizens of the slaveholding States had commenced, determined to take the job out of their hands, and to finish it, not by contract, nor by permission, but by main force, and in their own way—the way, too, most offensive and injurious to those who really possessed the sole right to interfere in the matter. This threw the people of those States upon their reserved rights, and compelled them, from self-respect, to abandon a labor they saw and felt the wisdom and necessity of completing. This impertinent meddling has cost the nation millions of dollars, and there is not one slave the less. If these agitators had but attended to their own business, the work of emancipation would have gone on smoothly and quietly; millions of dollars would have been saved to the public treasury; the bond of union among the States would have been strengthened; the public business would have received prompt attention; and demagogues would have sunk into the obscurity they deserve. It is not too late to bring these things about yet. It is true, the money that has been squandered, and the time that has been wasted, cannot be recalled; but we can start anew, and escape from the dangers that threaten, and make the future atone for the past.

We have much business on hand that is properly our own, or has been intrusted to us by a confiding people. Why should we not give our attention to that first? And when that is done, let us return to those who employ us, and give an account of our stewardship, and inquire what other service we can perform for their benefit. But no: here we are forever disputing about matters without form or substance.

The course pursued by this House reminds me of an anecdote I have heard of a little boy who went to a woman in his neighborhood to get her to patch his pantaloons. The boy had perhaps been sliding on the cellar-door too much: at any rate, the seat of his pantaloons was considerably damaged; and I fancy he looked very much like the "mill-boy of the slashes," who is represented by his admiring friends, mounted on his grist, going to mill, "with his shirt-tail sticking out behind." The woman asked him why his mother did not put a patch on for him. "Why," said the lad, "she is busy at a sewing society, making clothes for the poor Greeks." "Well," replied the woman, "ask your mother to come home and attend to her own household, and then, if she has any time to spare, she can give it to the Greeks."

There is a moral in this little story quite applicable to the present condition of things here. We are here busily expending our sympathies and time upon the Greeks, who are far away, and who have not solicited our interference, while, as John Randolph said, "the Greeks are at our doors." Yes, sir, there are some twenty millions of these American Greeks at our doors, asking and expecting much at our hands; and they have a right not only to ask and to expect, but to demand, a compliance with their wishes. And are we to turn a deaf ear to their prayers and their wants, and force our tender care upon those who ask it not, and into regions to which our forefathers solemnly bound themselves and their posterity it should never be extended?

Sir, if we wish to interfere with State institutions, have we not, in most of these States, an institution equally unjust and injurious to the great body of the people and to the prosperity of the country with this much-talked-about and much-sympathized-about slavery? I mean the banking institution. This infamous institution not only holds slaves, but exists by making slaves—not of the black man, but of the white man; it is forever riveting its insidious chains upon the needy and upon the unwary. Many an honest, hard-working man has mangled rails for fifty cents a hundred, that he might be able to get a little coffee, or tea, or sugar, or some other delicacy or necessary, for a sick wife or child, or to pay a doctor's bill, and received for his labor the false promises of this kind of institution, when perhaps the very next day they become worthless, leaving the poor man and his family to suffer, whilst the bankers roll in luxury purchased by these frauds. Sir, this is no fancy sketch; it has happened to thousands. There is scarcely a laboring man in any of the States where banking is tolerated but has been injured more or less by this villanous institution. There has been more misery, more real heart-rending distress, inflicted upon the white population of this country, within twenty years, by banks, than upon the blacks within fifty years by slavery. Startling as this declaration may appear, it is true. And yet these gentlemen who talk so glibly about enlarging "the circle of human sympathies and human affections," so as to take in the negroes, exclude from that circle the unfortunate victims of this hellish system, although of their own color, and, peradventure, of their own blood.

Sir, here is an enemy to human liberty, to equal rights, and to sound morality, that ought to be subdued. I think there is a clause in the Constitution which prohibits the "emission of bills of credit by any of the States." Now, if these bank notes are not "bills of credit," they are but the shabby substitutes for them, and ought to be suppressed. In this measure the whole Union is interested, and a day now and then might be profitably employed on it. But this question is not now before Congress; but it has a much better right to be here than this everlasting question of slavery.

It is my deliberate opinion that this abolitionism is another of the devices invented by that old arch-enemy of Democratic principles, known in modern times by the name of Whiggery. I have seen it assume so many disguises, and take so many different roads, that when I see any new humbug started I feel pretty certain this old antag-

onist is at the bottom of it. Like the scuttle-fish, which, when it is pursued by an enemy, immediately roils the water, in order to conceal itself in the dirt it raises, or to blind its foe, and thereby make its escape, the Whig party is almost all the time in muddy water. I remember a few years ago it ventured to attack the old sage who sleeps at the Hermitage, in clear water, but its defeat was so overwhelming that it immediately took refuge in the muddy waters of anti-masonry, and then, thinking itself quite concealed from view, renewed the attack on the old man and the Democratic party, but without doing the least harm. It has been in dirty water and in dirty business pretty much ever since, and has got so used to it that it now asserts a claim to all free dirt, and a little more, and has managed to envelop itself so thoroughly in it that many good people are deceived by it. I think, however, if we could get this abolition fish into clear water, and scrape a few of the scales off it, we would find it belongs to the Whig family. But I care not what forms it may assume, nor what claims it may set up, if it would only keep them out of this Chamber, and allow us to proceed with the business for the transaction of which we are assembled.

I declare, in the presence of this House, before my constituents and the world, the course this House is pursuing is disgraceful and degrading to its character. The session is now about half over; there is a vast amount of public business to attend to—business, too, of the highest importance; yet here we are caviling about abstractions. A solemn voice warns us to desist from this misapplication of time. The cholera is approaching; and I predict, that in another week it will be among us.

And if it should come, Congress will not be kept together one week after the event. There are yet no appropriations made for the ensuing year; and should a cholera panic dissolve this House without these appropriations, the very worst of evils must inevitably flow from it, or an early extra session of Congress will have to be called, at a cost of a few hundred thousand dollars, which can every cent be saved, if gentlemen would only stop to reflect what is their duty, and how short the time for discharging it. And I earnestly urge it upon their sober consideration to lay aside all extraneous questions, and to go to work upon the business which the Constitution has expressly placed in their hands, to consult the interests of their common country, and to hearken to the petitions sent here by their constituents suggesting measures for legislative action. With these most important national interests before us, we permit our time, to be consumed in these disgraceful scenes. I feel it, therefore, to be my duty to ask the Speaker to inform me how I can get clear of this idle, worse than useless wrangling—whether by a motion to lay on the table, or to postpone indefinitely, or by what other way?

[SEVERAL VOICES: "Call the previous question."]

Mr. SAWYER. Well, I will do so: and I am not afraid to vote upon it. I move the previous question, and I will not withdraw it.

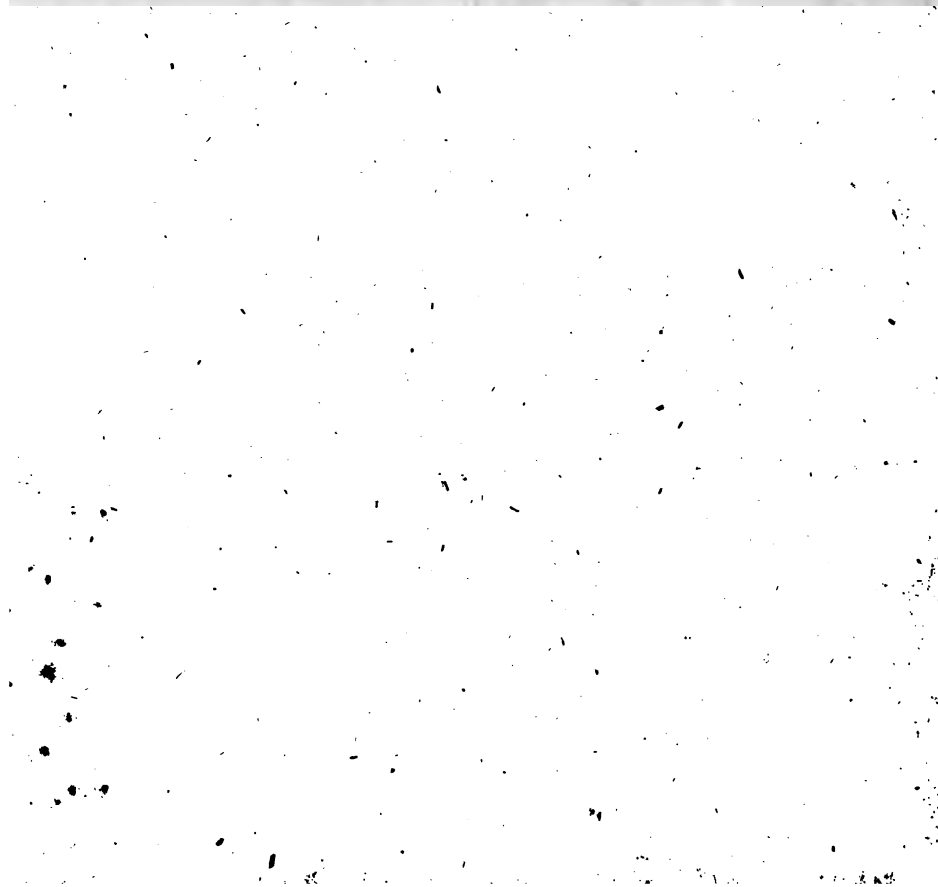
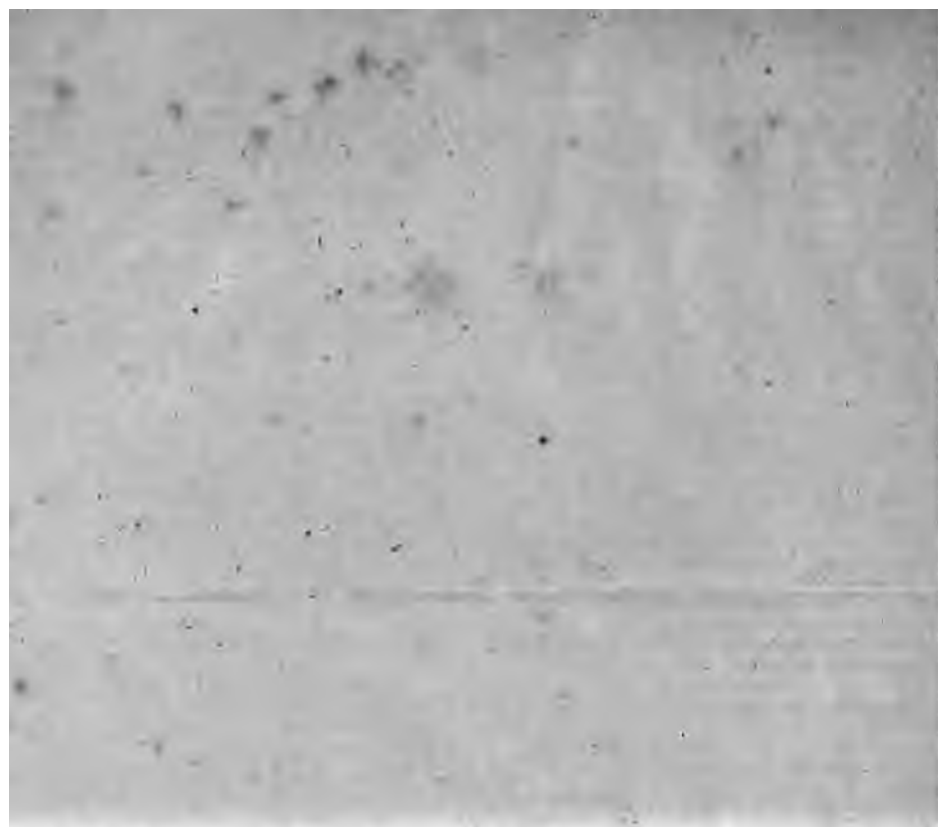
Mr. GIDDINGS. I want the ear of my colleague for a moment.

Mr. SAWYER. No, sir.

Mr. GIDDINGS. I want to inquire of my colleague—

Mr. SAWYER. I want to go to some other business.





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